

# Evaluating Cultural Resources

## Challenging Issues for the 21st Century

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**A**t the turn of the 21st century, cultural resources professionals are faced with identifying, evaluating, and registering cultural resources that challenge commonly held assumptions about what is “historic” and worthy of preservation. The concept of significance changes with the passage of time, new scholarship, and a better understanding of the need to recognize historic places associated with all of the nation’s diverse cultural groups.

As the lead federal agency for cultural resources preservation in the United States, the National Park Service (NPS) plays a central role in evaluating and recognizing challenging resources through the National Register of Historic Places and the National Historic Landmarks (NHL) Survey. These challenges also are evident when new properties are proposed for the national park system or when the NPS is asked to become involved in their stewardship and interpretation. As the recipient of some 2,000 nominations, requests for determinations of eligibility, and related actions each year, the National Register of Historic Places has gained a national overview of many of the current challenges.

One of the major challenges of the preservation movement is the identification of historic places associated with traditional cultures, such as American Indian tribes. These traditional cultural places (TCPs) can be large landscape features with traditional values not easily recognizable to

those outside the cultural group. Obtaining information about them is often difficult because tribes may not trust or may be uncomfortable with giving information to outsiders or have cultural prohibitions against doing so. The information about their values may be held by a small number of traditional practitioners or even a single traditional leader, and passed down orally with few or no written sources to assist in evaluation. Defining boundaries, integrity of condition, and the overlay of development unrelated to traditional cultural values and the sometimes contradictory perspectives of archeologists and Native Americans<sup>1</sup> are other issues.

The Zuni Salt Lake and Sanctuary in New Mexico is a 182,406-acre site that is sacred to six tribes: the Zuni, Western Pueblos (Acoma, Laguna, Hopi), Apache, and Navajo. The Zuni Salt Lake is a historic source of salt and home to Salt Mother. The Sanctuary or neutral zone, which encompasses most of the acreage, is a sacred place where Native Americans pay homage to Salt Mother by keeping a reverent attitude and avoiding hunting or violence. Each tribe makes pilgrimages to Salt Lake and maintains and uses shrines in the Sanctuary zone defined by the natural topography of the area as viewed from the crest of the crater containing Salt Lake. Five trails not visible to the naked eye were relocated and mapped as the result of an aerial survey. The Lake and Sanctuary have a long history of significance based in traditional practice extending from time immemorial to the present and an ongoing role in the retention and transmission of the cultures of the tribes who maintain their traditional use of the sites.

Issues included whether the ethnographic study and the nomination contained enough explicit justification to include the large sanctuary zone, because of the behavior of travelers through the neutral area; and how to set boundaries. Information in the nomination was not sufficient to justify the contribution claimed for the hundreds, possibly thousands, of archeological sites, historic ruins, and other features, shrines

*Zuni Salt Lake,  
New Mexico.  
Photo by Beth  
Boland, National  
Register of  
Historic Places,  
National Park  
Service.*



and possibly other resources in the area, so the area was determined eligible as one large site. Tribes were also concerned that some of the information in the ethnographic reports be kept confidential as is allowed under Section 304 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

The National Register's bulletin, *Guidelines for Evaluating and Documenting Traditional Cultural Places*, our videotape on the same topic,<sup>2</sup> policy letters, and workshops involving tribes and other CRM professionals have provided impetus and assistance in identifying and evaluating traditional cultural places. But additional technical information is needed on how to document TCPs, as are good examples of studies.

The last decade has seen an increasing number of archeologists, anthropologists, historians, and other cultural resources professionals working more closely with native groups. We need to increase the cooperation and assure the evaluation of cultural resources from different perspectives. Scientific goals of archeologists should not violate values. We must learn how to better use historical evidence based on oral traditions, ethnographic studies, and religious and traditional practices to provide the multiple lines of evidence necessary to evaluate TCPs. The National Park Service should also provide leadership by conducting studies to identify TCPs within units of the national park system that are national models of how to do this work.

Questions of adequate documentation and physical integrity have also arisen in evaluating properties associated with other groups in themes such as the Underground Railroad (UGRR). Because the UGRR was highly secretive, much of what we know comes from oral traditions. While oral traditions can offer important clues to events, the challenge is to find corroborating evidence. Another concern is historic integrity. Still another relates to what kinds of questions can be answered from archeological evidence at UGRR sites, part of a larger question about how to determine which historical archeological sites are worthy of study and recognition.<sup>3</sup>

To be eligible for the National Register under any of the criteria, evidence of UGRR associations must be convincing. What is at a property today must be able to physically convey its UGRR associations. For example, the John P. Parker House in Ripley, Ohio, is the home of a former slave who, from 1853 until his death, planned from this location many rescue attempts

of slaves held captive in the "borderlands" of Kentucky. This building was in very poor condition when it was designated a NHL, but still clearly recognizable as the home of John Parker during the period of significance.

The National Park Service is providing leadership on the evaluation of UGRR sites. The National Historic Landmarks Survey has completed an UGRR theme study in the National Register multiple property documentation format that provides the historic context, sources of information, a list of property types, and registration and integrity requirements to assist in determining which properties are eligible for National Historic Landmark designation and for National Register listing. The theme study, sample nominations, and a travel itinerary of UGRR properties are available on the National Park Service web site <[www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/](http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/)>. Of some 50 UGRR historic places that are listed in the National Register, 15 have been designated as National Historic Landmarks. Research is proceeding to identify additional properties.

We must assure that historic preservation tells an inclusive American story. In 2000, the National Park Service published a congressionally-mandated National Historic Landmarks theme study on racial desegregation in public education. Completed in partnership with the Organization of American Historians and the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers, this study tells a multi-ethnic story of racial desegregation, from the 1840s through the early 1970s. Prepared in the National Register multiple property format like the UGRR theme study and available in print and on the National Park Service web site <[www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/nhl/school.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/nhl/school.htm)>, it provides historic context and sets out the property types and registration requirements for national significance and National Register eligibility.

The National Park Service also has begun a study on the history of American civil rights. This study will provide a framework from which the National Park Service can establish a long-term research program to identify, evaluate, and preserve sites associated with this theme, but additional funding will be needed to complete the study. In the meantime, significant properties relating to civil rights are being assessed individually. Stonewall in New York City, the site of the 1969 raid and demonstrations regarded by many

as the single most important event that led to the modern gay and lesbian liberation movement, was nominated to the National Register by the New York State Historic Preservation Officer, listed, and subsequently designated a NHL.

Evaluating properties from the recent past is continually challenging. National Register criteria for evaluation require that properties that have achieved significance in the last 50 years be of exceptional importance to qualify for listing. These resources account for about 3% of the more than 73,000 National Register listings. While some critics disagree with the exceptional importance requirement, the criteria consideration guards against the listing of properties of passing contemporary interest and ensures that the National Register is a list of truly historic places. Recent properties can be evaluated only when sufficient historical perspective exists to determine that the property is important. Scholarly research must be done to document both the historic context and the specific property's role in that context. The National Register bulletin on evaluating properties that have achieved significance within the last 50 years is periodically updated.<sup>4</sup>

More recent properties join earlier National Register listings to add new chapters in traditional themes of American history. Post-World War II suburbanization is not a new theme but a more recent stage in a process that began in the 19th century. Suburbanization gained momentum in the post-World War II period due to the demands of a growing population, incentives for home builders, favorable financial terms for prospective home owners, use of mass production methods and prefabricated construction materials, and the standardization of zoning and subdivision design. State Historic Preservation Offices and local governments need additional survey information and contextual studies (existing surveys seldom extend beyond World War II) to assist in evaluation.

To encourage the development of contexts at the local level and to help evaluate suburbs, David Ames of the University of Delaware has written a nationwide context on the suburbanization of America from 1830-1960 for the National Register. This context uses a framework based on changing modes of transportation from the railroad to the automobile. It examines historical trends that affected the growth and development of residential suburbs in America,

including real estate financing, community planning, subdivision design and zoning, house design and construction, and suburban landscape design.

To assist in the conduct of local surveys of recent subdivisions, we are completing a National Register bulletin focusing on the residential subdivision as a significant historic property type. This bulletin provides a summary glance at the history of suburbanization, and sets forth guidelines for developing local contexts, implementing streamlined methods for survey, and making the critical decisions of significance and integrity in neighborhoods.

Distinctive design characteristics and important historic associations mark many residential subdivisions of the postwar period. Neighborhoods, such as National Register-listed Arapahoe Acres in Englewood, Colorado, built between 1949 and 1957, stand out for their high quality architectural design and outstanding historic integrity. The combined expertise of developer Ernest Hawkins and designers—Eugene Sternberg, Joseph Dion, and Stanley Yoshimura—make Arapahoe Acres not only representative of a period of expansive suburbanization in Denver after World War II, but also one of a small and finite number of subdivisions nationwide based on architect-developer collaboration and modernistic principles of design. These subdivisions of contemporary homes received national acclaim by architectural and housing magazines and commendation of the prestigious Southwest Research Institute, which espoused quality of design for low-cost, efficient housing using modern materials and construction methods.

Modern architecture is another challenging subject. Much of it is threatened long before it reaches the 50-year mark, both because of the failure of building materials which require intervention and its lack of popularity with some sectors of the public. We are able to list and even designate as NHLs modern buildings designed by architects whose work has been recognized by honor awards and in popular and scholarly publications. We are not listing buildings designed by still practicing architects, when it is too early to evaluate the body of their work and listing could be used to help architects obtain future commissions.

The North Carolina State Historic Preservation Officer nominated four houses and an office building as part of the Early Modern



First Baptist Church, Columbus, Indiana. Photo by Marsh Davis, Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana.

Architecture Associated with the North Carolina School of Design multiple property submission. This group of buildings dating from the 1950s to 1968, is significant as the work of a small group of highly-talented architects at one of the best known American schools of design in the early post-war period. The Matsumoto and Small houses and the Small Office Building incorporate for the first time in the state the aesthetic concepts developed by Mies van der Rohe.

The National Historic Landmarks Survey was able to support nominations for the Irwin Union Bank and Trust, the Miller House, First Baptist Church, North Christian Church, First Christian Church, and the Mabel McDowell Elementary School in Columbus, Indiana. The sponsors of the nominations developed the context to evaluate their significance in a *Modernism in Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Design and Art in Bartholomew County, Indiana, 1942-1965, National Historic Landmark Theme Study*. Other historic properties are likely to be recognized under this context.

In other themes, decisions about treatment are forcing the establishment of contexts for evaluations. The Department of Defense has funded two excellent histories of the Cold War, *Defend and Deter: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Missile Program*, and *Searching the Skies: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Defense Radar Program*,<sup>5</sup> but registration requirements still need to be defined.

The National Park Service and our preservation partners are addressing many of the challenging issues, but we must do more. The National Register is preparing new bulletins as quickly as possible when a need arises to provide general guidance on a particular evaluation issue. Old theme studies and context documents and already-inventoried historic places should be reassessed and updated in light of new scholarship and the passage of time and to assure that they

are documented for the full range of their values. The resources of diverse cultural groups should be identified as quickly as possible in concert with those groups.

We should move forward to undertake new theme and multiple property context studies on priority topics, while striving for more partnerships between agencies and organizations to support them. National Park Service staff and our partners sponsor and participate in many conferences and provide a variety of assistance to the public, but we need to do more to assure that we are addressing the challenging issues and educating the public about the full range of cultural resource values. We owe it to the American people to provide leadership to meet the preservation challenges of the 21st century.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Darby C. Stapp and Julie Lonenecker, "Working Together-The Times, They are A-Changin': Can Archaeologists and Native Americans Change with the Times?," *Society for American Archeology Bulletin* 18 (2000): 18-20.
- <sup>2</sup> *Through the Generations: Identifying and Protecting Traditional Cultural Places*, 1998. This videotape was a collaborative effort of the Department of the Interior, National Park Service, National Register of Historic Places, Department of Agriculture, National Resources Conservation Service, National Employee Development Center, and Advisory Council on Historic Preservation.
- <sup>3</sup> Katherine Deagan, "Neither History Nor Prehistory: The Questions that Count in Historical Archeology," *Historical Archeology*, 22:1 (1988): 7-12; Donald L. Hardesty, "Research Questions and Important Information," *CRM*, 18:6 (1995): 4-8; Susan Henry, "The National Register and the 20th Century: Is There Room for Archeology?" *CRM*, 18:6 (1995): 9-13.
- <sup>4</sup> Marcella Sherfy and W. Ray Luce, *National Register Bulletin 22: Guidelines for Evaluating and Nominating Properties that Have Achieved Significance Within the Past Fifty Years*, Washington, DC: National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, revised 1998.
- <sup>5</sup> John C. Lonnquest and David F. Winkler, *To Defend and Deter: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Missile Program*, A Study Sponsored by the Department of Defense Legacy Resource Management Program Cold War Project, 1996; Department of Defense, United States Air Force, Air Combat Command, *Searching the Skies: The Legacy of the United States Cold War Defense Radar Program*, Headquarters Air Combat Command, 1997.

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